

WASHINGTON (AP) - New Commerce Secretary Gary Locke on Monday exhorted census volunteers to boost outreach in hard-to-count communities as a top lawmaker urged the government to halt immigration raids to ensure an accurate count.

Speaking at a Census Bureau training conference, Locke and Rep. William Lacy Clay, D-Mo., tried to allay fears in Hispanic and Asian communities where immigrants often mistake census workers for tax collectors or law enforcement officials.

"It is your familiar, trusted voices that will help us succeed in educating residents about the census," Locke, who is Asian-American, said in his first public appearance since taking office. Without specifically mentioning immigration, Locke stressed that personal information in the census form will remain confidential. Clay went a step further, urging the partnership groups, ranging from the AFL-CIO and Coca-Cola to the NAACP and Vote Latino, to expose any "sinister tricks" to dissuade immigrants from completing their census forms.

There are nearly 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S., many of them clustered in states such as California, New York, Florida and Texas, which stand to either lose House seats or gain fewer seats depending on whether their Hispanic communities are fully counted.

Speaking to The Associated Press afterward, Clay said he planned to push the Obama administration to halt raids next year, noting that immigration officials did so during the 2000 census.

"It think it should be repeated to tamp down on any fears the immigrant population might have on certain raids, whether they are here legally or not," said Clay, who chairs the House subcommittee overseeing the census.

"They don't want that hanging over them," he said. In 2000, immigration officials at the request of the Census Bureau informally agreed to not conduct large-scale immigration raids. The bureau two years ago asked the Homeland Security Department to hold off again in 2010, but

was rejected by the Bush administration, which said it would continue to enforce federal laws.

Locke left before Clay made his comments about halting raids. A spokeswoman for Locke on Monday declined to comment, referring the inquiry to the census bureau. "We do not have plans currently to renew the request," said Stephen Buckner, a spokesman for the bureau, explaining that the agency's focus was to improve the count with increased ad campaigns and stronger partnerships with trusted leaders in the Hispanic community.

"If sentiment changes, or there appears to be increasing challenges in the count based on what happens down the road, we might be open to reevaluating that," Buckner said. More than a hundred representatives attended the three-hour conference, many of whom expressed concern about reaching minorities, particularly Hispanics, given rising anti-immigration sentiment after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

Their comments came as the bureau on Monday launched its major address canvassing operation where 140,000 government workers are fanning neighborhoods to verify addresses and identify homes now abandoned due to mortgage foreclosures.

Panelists noted that Asian and Hispanic immigrants *both legal and illegal* typically view a census worker as someone who works also on behalf of Immigration and Customs Enforcement or IRS tax collectors. Blacks, too, are distrustful as to the census' possible ties with law enforcement, they said. "It's going to be a challenge for officials," said Ivelisse Estrada, a senior vice president for Univision, the Spanish-language network, stressing that the census media campaign will have to focus on a message that personal information will remain confidential.